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ABSTRACT

Each class session of a reading methods course at a Texas university begins with an instructor reading aloud from a children's book. The instructors, who hoped this method would reduce future teachers' reliance on basal materials and help them prepare for assignments involving children's literature, came to believe that this time was well spent. They also observed additional unforseen benefits. Increasing numbers of students used those same selections in their own elementary school classrooms and appeared to value reading aloud daily to their students. The instructors developed a questionnaire for all elementary education students that, in addition to recording students' spontaneous comments, asked them to agree or disagree with several statements on the benefits of reading aloud in elementary classrooms. For all of 12 items on the questionnaire, students who had been read to in their methods course showed stronger agreement than students who had not. Although it might be argued that elementary education students were likely to be enthusiastic about children's literature and appreciate its potential as an instructional resource, the methods instructors felt it worthwhile to continue reading aloud to their students and monitoring their responses. (A list of children's books particularly suited for reading aloud is included.) (HTH)

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Some Effects of Reading Aloud In Undergraduate Methods Classes

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"Good morning; this is EDCI 351, and this is Peter Hatcher, who is just sure that his little brother Fudge is ruining his life ...."

At the beginning of each first-day-of-class episode like this, our students exchange some pretty puzzled and disbelieving looks. But it isn't long before these looks turn to smiles of enjoyment, as they relax and let themselves be caught up in a story from a book written for children.

We begin each class session in our reading methods courses with a chapter from a children's book like Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, or a complete, shorter

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selection like Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day. We started doing this about two years ago, because we wanted to promote the sharing and use of literature in elementary school classrooms. We were concerned about the overreliance of teachers in general and beginning teachers in particular on the basal reader as the sole source of materials and activities for reading instruction. We also found our students unprepared for assignments that required them to use children's literature: reading to children during field experiences, developing lesson plans built around the use of trade books, developing literature webs, and making whole-language games based on children's books. We wanted to demonstrate oral reading, share the fun, let our students discover (or rediscover) the pleasure of being read to, and thereby encourage them to read to their future classes.

But in the beginning, we worried. There always seems to be so much to do in a reading methods course, and sharing children's literature takes time. Just ten minutes per class period adds up to nearly five hours of class time over the course of a semester, and so we wondered: Can reading aloud to a class really be worth so much time, given our seemingly modest goals in the beginning?

We've come to believe that the time we spend reading to our students is very well spent. Not only did reading aloud accomplish its original purposes, but it also brought some benefits that we hadn't foreseen.

Almost as soon as we began reading aloud daily, we began to see evidence that our students were both better prepared and more inclined to use children's literature. After hearing the third chapter of Soup, one student stopped by after class to show off her new paperback copy of that book and say that she had started to read it to some neighborhood kids after school. Almost every book we read was purchased by at least some of the students, and we began to hear increasingly numerous accounts of how they planned to use these books in units and lessons, or how they were received by children in elementary classrooms, or just how enjoyable

they were discovering the process of reading aloud to be. A number of students developed units and programs featuring the use of trade books during their student teaching experience. As a group, our students began to realize the value of reading aloud daily to elementary students. As one put it, "You know, I always thought that kids need to be doing something constructive all the time, and that reading to them would be goofing off, allowing them to daydream or something. When you valued it enough to read to us, I began to realize how important it is." Even though we had lectured about the benefits of the sharing of literature, and the importance of developing the patterns of written language in children's heads through engagement with the language of books, the day an undergraduate dropped her backpack on the desk and said with a groan, "I think I'll move to Australia", we realized that those points had been made through demonstration more vividly than they could through any lecture. Everyone knew, without being told, that she was having a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day."

As students were introduced to a wider variety of children's literature, they began to appreciate the human concerns it reflects which transcend the surface distinctions and cultural differences in our world. They met and adopted characters like Alexander, and they were introduced to the growing pains of Tony Miglione in Then Again, Maybe I Won't; they also experienced the adventures, fears, and triumphs of Rob in A Day No Pigs Would Die.

They also began the appreciate the enjoyment that accompanies being read to at any age:

> Being read to made me want to hear what was going to happen to the little boy after he drank the potion in Freckle Juice, or to find out what Robert Peck would do with his pig in A Day No Pigs Would Die. I don't think I'll ever forget the story of The Velveteen Rabbit or how much fun Kay Moss had reading Rollo and Juliet Forever.

They started to realize that reading aloud could also be more than just enjoyable:

> I thoroughly enjoyed being read to. I feel that sharing a story creates a special bond between all those involved. While it's being read, we all have a chance to escape reality and share a common situation produced by the story.
>
> I loved being read to. I never realized how much I missed it! I guess what I remember most is the feeling of sitting relaxed in my chair with all the words floating around me, creating fantastic pictures in my mind.

And on occasion, we were made to realize that as beneficial as reading aloud to older kids is, it isn't as common in schools as we might like to think:

> I really enjoyed being read to, and found myself feeling like I did in sixth-grade -- the last time I can remember having a teacher read to the class.

We also realized, as did some of our students, that children's literature can be an excellent vehicle for developing some insights about children and childhood:

> Having children's books read to me made me feel like a kid again. It reminded me of childhood games and all those mischievous things I used to do.

The enjoyment that students experienced in being read to is obvious throughout the quotations from them that have been shared. To some, at least, it was also a memorable experience as well as enjoyable. One former student who is now an elementary teacher said "If I pick up a book you read to us, I hear your voice and intonation patterns."

Encouraged by these indications that our original goals were being reached to some extent, we began to consider the possibility that the literature we were reading could serve instructional purposes for us. Although most of the literature we read is chosen because we like it and wish to share it, there are some pieces which are now chosen with a particular instructional purpose in mind. Leo the Late Bloomer leads naturally to a discussion of reading "readiness", since it so beautifully illustrates the "blooming" which occurs while Leo is busily engaged in reading and writing. The notion of book patterning, as described by Lynn Rhodes (1981), can be demonstrated after reading Mercer Mayer's If I Had .... by allowing

the students to adapt Mayer's framework and generate such college-oriented gems as "If I had a bulldozer, I'd drive it to campus, then I wouldn't have any trouble finding a parking place ... If I had a bulldozer." All in the Morning Early is a good piece for demonstrating choral reading, and a passage from Anastasia Krupnik evokes painful memories of writing poetry in school for some students as it sparks a lively discussion of that topic.

Occasionally we take a few minutes to discuss why a particular book was chosen, or how the book might be used with particular age groups. We might talk about the uses and effects of illustrations, the different formats of books, the characteristics of particular genres, or other children's books with similar themes. At least one complete novel is read each semester, which creates opportunities to demonstrate instructional strategies for helping young readers predict plot, events, or outcomes in longer selections.

Of course, all this is very satisfying to us, and it convinces us even more strongly that our time devoted to oral reading is indeed well spent. But as the semesters passed, we began to realize that there was even more in the way of benefits than we had bargained for.

As we read to our students over several semesters, we began to notice some recurring positive statements about reading aloud in our after-class conversations with our students. We heard a few students propose, for example, that reading aloud to children might facilitate their writing development; several others mentioned that reading aloud might promote a sense of camaraderie among students in elementary classrooms. As these kinds of comments surfaced and became more numerous, we began to wonder again: Was the experience of being read to causing our students to reflect on the experience and what it was doing (or might do) for them, and consider if it might do the same sorts of things for elementary school children? Would this sort of reflection be practiced by undergraduate students who were not being read to? Would the insights that were surfacing among our students be any

different from the notion of other students who were not read to? We decided to try to check it out.

To do so, we developed a brief questionnaire that included those spontaneous comments that we had been hearing from students. For each of the following statements in the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree): 1) help students to discover that books have meaningful intent, 2) help students learn important lessons about life, 3) enhance and maintain the teacher's interest in teaching reading, 4) help students become familiar with language patterns, 5) facilitate valued clarification by students, 6) maintain the interest of students in the reading instruction they receive, 7) enhance communication between students and teachers, 8) promote students' writing development, 9) enhance and maintain the interest of students in books, 10) provide for students a relaxing moment in their day, 11) facilitate vocabulary growth, 12) develop camaraderie among students. The questionnaire was then given to 24 of our students at random, and 24 students chosen randomly from a reading methods section in which the instructor did not read aloud in class. After responding to these items, students were asked to write additional comments on a second page of the questionnaire. From these responses, we were able to corroborate our notion that as valuable as the sharing of literature in oral reading was to students, they recalled relatively few instances of being read to in school, particularly on a regular basis. All of the responses to both pages of the questionnaire were obtained during the last week of the semester.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviation for each questionnaire item for the two groups of students.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

On the surface, it might seem as though there is little difference in the two groups of students in terms of their responses, and that reading to students

in class each day made no difference in their degree of agreement with the statements given in the questionnaire. However, it might be argued that elementary education students in general are likely to be enthusiastic about children's literature and its potential as an instructional resource. In light of this, it is certainly worth noting that for 11 of the 12 items, students who were read to showed stronger agreement than students who did not have this experience in their methods classes. Also, the response variance was smaller, for 8 of the 12 items, among students who were read to each day in class.

We were particularly interested in the results from item 3 in the questionnaire. It seems that students who experience children's literature read aloud may develop a surer sense of how reading aloud to children can sustain and enhance a teacher's interest in and enthusiasm for reading instruction - even though these students are not yeat reading to kids each day, but only be read to. We would very much like to think that we are so interesting and enthusiastic as readers of books for children and teachers of our course that our students can't help but see the connection in their future careers - - but, alas, we have no data to support our vanity!

We would also like to point out that we aren't totally optimistic about the data from our questionnaire. It may be that some of our students aren't as inclined to make use of children's literature in their teaching as we would hope. But for many of them, we are convinced that a real committment to the use of children's books in reading and writing instruction exists, and that it is based on some insights developed in the process of being read to in class.

We are convinced enough to continue to read to our methods students as we continue to monitor their reactions. We have also given some thought to ways of getting them more directly involved.

One idea we have come to adopt is to require that each student read something aloud to the class during the semester. We begin by reading through a book at the rate of a chapter per class session; the students then sign up for the remaining class days to read either a brief predictable book or a chapter from a longer

work. The reading is followed by a brief description of possible follow-up activities and, in the case of a longer book, a synopsis of the whole story.

Yet another idea, so far untried, is to divide the class into groups of four the five students at the beginning of the semester. Each group would then be required to select a single book and choose one person to read it (or an excerpt from it) and discuss the age or interest group to whom it would appeal; other members of the group would present follow-up activities that relate to the book, or identify other books with similar themes that would be of interest to the same age or interest group.

Another idea we think has promise is that of using "text adoption committees". This would involve students working in small groups to select works of children's literature to be read in class, on the basis of their literary merit and their demonstrated appeal to children. Each group would present its evaluation of the book's literary qualities and evidence of its appeal, and then read a chapter or excerpt to the class.

Having identified some future directions that we intend to take in reading to our methods classes, would also like to share our list of books that we have read to our classes over the last two years. Of course, they're not the only, selections to choose from or necessarily the best, and we expect that our list will grow a great deal as we continue to explore and experiment.

One source that we will certainly consult very often is Jim Trelease's The Read-Aloud Handbook (1982). It is written for parents, and presents a very good, well-written rationale for reading to children and young adults as well as discussion of how to initiate and sustain the practice of reading aloud. We recommend it to our students as an invaluable resource for their own classrooms as well as for sharing with the parents of their students. It also includes an extensive list of children's books that are especially well-suited for reading aloud.

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With our brief bibliography and Trelease's book in hand, we invite you to join us and share children's literature with your own methods students. We believe that everyone concerned will be richer for it.

TABLE 1

Differences between undergraduates whose instructors did or did not read children's literature aloud as demonstrated by individual questionaire items.

Questionaire Statement	Classrooms: Reading (n=24) mean	SD	No Reading (n=24) mean	SD
Meaningful intent	1.3	.5	1.4	.7
Life lessons	1.8	.9	2.0	1.0
Teacher's interest	1.6	.7	2.3	1.1
Language patterns	1.3	.5	1.5	.6
Value Clarification	1.7	.8	2.0	.9
Student interest	1.5	.8	1.5	.7
Student-teacher communication	1.6	.8	1.8	.7
Student writing	2.0	1.2	2.1	1.1
Student interest	1.3	.4	1.5	.7
Student relaxtion	1.2	.7	1.3	.7
Vocabulary growth	1.3	.5	1.4	.6
Student camaraderie	2.0	1.0	2.5	1.0

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